

# Appalachia

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## The World of Christina: Reflections on the Journey Home

Judy Benson

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# The World of Christina

*Reflections on the journey home*

**Judy Benson**



ON THE RAGGED COAST OF MAINE, ALONG ONE OF THE BONY FINGERS that reach to the Atlantic Ocean, a mostly empty house faces the world with exposed gray clapboards weathered by decades of wind, rain, ice, and sun. Months after meandering through the musty rooms, peering out the cobwebbed windows, and crossing the dirt trail to the family cemetery, I can't stop thinking about that house and its story.

Located in the tiny town of Cushing, the house sits roughly halfway between Bald Rock Mountain in Camden and Monhegan Island some thirteen miles offshore. The first full day of our long weekend in Maine, my husband Tom and I hiked to the peak of the mountain to savor the views of Penobscot Bay, an outsized reward for the three and a half miles of trekking required. Two days later, we rode the mail boat from Port Clyde to Monhegan Island to climb the trails there, along high rocky cliffs with pounding surf below, an iconic Maine seascape where the forces of nature are laid bare. The artist Rockwell Kent spent formative years working and painting on the island, one in a long line of creative characters inspired by midcoast Maine, from Edna St. Vincent Millay to E.B. White to the Wyeth family (more on them later).

We did not plan our stop at the house in Cushing in the middle of those two hikes. I wasn't even aware it was a place open to the public until a couple of hours before we went there. Its impact on me had everything to do with context—after and before exerting physical effort to reach natural wonders. In this house between the rocky peaks in Camden and the island, the last inhabitant lived in obscurity yet became unwittingly famous for her struggle for human dignity that was at least as challenging every day as any mountain I could climb. It was a place both familiar and strange to me at the same time, stirring deep feelings because of how my personal story intersects with this house and because of its setting on a grassy shoulder atop a coastal crag, turned toward Muscongus Bay and the endless sea.

Most of the best journeys of my life have been deliberate ventures to particular landscapes. Among them I count the crest of Mount Washington; a cloud forest in Costa Rica; the subterranean world of the ancient aqueducts north of Rome; the canyons of New Mexico, Utah, and Colorado; and the

*Judy Benson's encounter with this one house on Maine's seacoast—the setting for Andrew Wyeth's most famous painting—expanded her sense of “what it means to move by my own strength across, up, and over the earth I am part of, and then to arrive back home to my place of attachment.”* JUDY BENSON

pinnacle of Skellig Michael in the Irish Sea (thankfully before Luke Skywalker discovered it). On each of these treks and others, the logistical and muscular challenges of getting to the place were key elements that gave birth to the treasures of wonder, awe, and deeper self-knowledge. Now, my encounter with this singular house, though requiring little in planning or muscle, takes a place among those other most memorable journeys. After being there, I will still seek outdoor adventures and keep my heart open to nature's messages, but with a new appreciation for the part of the journey that comes after reaching the destination. Like crawling through a tunnel to reach an open road, time in this interior chamber yielded a new understanding for what it means to move by my own strength across, up, and over the earth I am part of, and then to arrive back home to my place of attachment.

To explain why requires going back some four and a half decades to when I was in middle school in Dover, New Jersey, a racially diverse working-class town on the commuter rail line to New York City. My English teacher had assigned the class to write an essay about a painting. Students could choose any painting from the art books the teacher had in the classroom, or find one on their own. My mother, a hobbyist painter, owned a book of Andrew Wyeth's paintings. I flipped through and found *Christina's World*, Wyeth's most famous painting. It shows the back of a young woman in a pink dress, dragging her marcescent limbs behind her as she pulls herself across a grassy field toward a plain but imposing gray house. Knowing nothing of the story of that image—painted in 1948 at that very house in Cushing I would one day visit—I wrote what I saw on that canvas. To me, it was the scene of a young woman not unlike me struggling and striving amid the place she called home. My own home was full of conflict and sometimes violence, but also love and a sense of belonging, so that image captured my imagination as the embodiment of how I was trying to reconcile ambivalent feelings and secure my own identity.

Decades later, I happened upon the original *Christina's World* during a visit to the Museum of Modern Art in New York City with a dear friend I've known since those days in middle school. It hangs in a hallway just off a stairwell, a masterpiece of realism that seems out of place amid the abstract and impressionist art around it. Upon seeing it, I was awestruck by its beauty and the meticulous brush strokes depicting each blade of grass, and how the egg tempera medium gave it a glowing, live quality. It was then I recalled—for the first time in years—my middle school essay. I wanted to learn more about the painting and see more of Andrew Wyeth's work.

A year or so later, I visited that same friend at her home near Philadelphia. We spent a day at the Brandywine River Museum, showcase for the works of the three most famous Wyeths—father N.C., Andrew, and Andrew's son Jamie. There, N.C.'s famous illustrations of Robin Hood and other larger-than-life storybook characters share space with Jamie's charming pig portrait and his other works. But Andrew's images are by far the most fascinating. One I recall, titled *Woodshed*, shows two black crows nailed to a weathered wall. Typical of the middle Wyeth's work, the color pallet is muted but still vibrant, the dead birds painted in near-photographic detail. His realism is not literal but highly selective, perhaps symbolic. As it holds your gaze, you wonder about death and life, hunters and prey, man and nature.

After the Brandywine, I learned about *Christina's World* from *A Piece of the World*, a biographical novel by Christina Baker Kline (William Morrow, 2017) based on the life of the subject of the painting, Anna Christina Olson. She suffered from a hereditary degenerative nerve condition that left her crippled by her 40s, the same disease that put her father in a wheelchair for the last decades of his life. Christina refused to use a wheelchair, and by the time Andrew Wyeth painted her in her 50s, she was habitually pulling herself across the field to get to her garden and back. In the old house where she and her brother Alvaro spent their entire lives until their deaths in the late 1960s, she would get around in a kitchen chair dragged across the creaky floors. I realized that the interpretation I put to that painting as an adolescent searching for my true self was pretty far off base. The actual circumstances of Christina's life, subsisting on a saltwater farm in rural Maine on her brother's fishing and hay crop, could hardly be more different from my upbringing in the urban sprawl of northern New Jersey. I had little in common with the figure in the painting, but that didn't dampen its power to stir my imagination.

I felt compelled to see more of Andrew Wyeth's paintings. While at the Brandywine, I learned that the other gallery with a large collection of his works was in Rockland, Maine, at the Farnsworth Museum, near where the Wyeth family had summered for generations. When the opportunity came, I determined I would go to the Farnsworth. Tom answered my desire when he proposed a long weekend in Maine over Memorial Day to celebrate our anniversary and birthdays. He was on a mission to pick up some custom-made oars for a boat he was building, but when he suggested making a mini-vacation out of the trip, I eagerly agreed. He found an Airbnb in a small town near Rockland, within a 90-minute drive from the oar shop. The first full day there, after picking up the oars and driving back to our lodgings, we hiked

Bald Rock Mountain and planned a trip to the Farnsworth for the next day because of rain in the forecast.

The museum was busy that morning, the computers at the check-in desk slow. As we waited in line, we started hearing about the Olson house. The clerks were asking visitors if they wanted a ticket to the house as well as the museum. Was it true that I could see the actual location that had been in my brain since middle school? Astonished, I said yes when my turn came. The house is fifteen miles away, and tours are on the hour, with only twelve people per tour. Tom and I decided to see the museum first, then head to Cushing in time for the 2 P.M. tour. On the walls of the main gallery hung one captivating scene after another, most in the egg tempera medium that conveyed the artist's tenderness and precision toward his subjects. *Adrift* showed a dear friend with throat cancer lying, coffin-like, in a dory. *Pentecost* depicted intricately woven fishing nets billowing in the breeze. For the final work of his life, *Farewell My Love*, Wyeth painted a sailboat passing a nearby island that his wife Betsy had purchased for his birthday. Moved by the artwork, I was now even more excited about seeing the house. But I had no idea of the rich experience this simple house would provide.

We arrived at the house late for the 2 P.M. tour, so decided to wander the grounds until the 3 P.M. opening. Following a dirt path away from the house toward the cliffs overlooking the bay, we came to a small cemetery. There, a plain headstone of the same dark gray as the house bears this succinct inscription: "Andrew Wyeth. 1917–2009." Behind his are the graves of the Hathorn and Olson families who had lived in the three-story house since it was built in the 1700s. Among them are markers for Anna Christina and Alvaro, the last of the Olsons to live there.

When the time for the tour came, we joined the ten other people on benches in the main sitting room to hear the history of the house and Wyeth's time there from a guide who loved telling the tale. The dwelling at one time had been a boarding house for summer tourists sailing into the bay from New York City and Boston for the fresh Maine air. Christina and Alvaro's Swedish immigrant father, John Olson, ended up marrying into the Hathorn family—relatives of the writer Nathaniel Hawthorne who spelled the surname differently—after the cargo ship he was working on got stranded when the bay froze over one winter.

Betsy Wyeth, whose family summered near the Olson house, introduced Andrew to Christina and Alvaro. Not yet the world-famous artist he would become, Andrew became fascinated with the old house, its setting, and the

simple dignity of Christina and Alvaro. Although some would judge them to be living in squalor, their house smelly and careworn, Wyeth saw in the siblings and their home elemental beauty, honesty, and unpretentious attachment to their humble corner of the world. Andrew befriended the pair, who agreed to let him use an upstairs room as his studio. Over 30 years he covered 300 canvases with scenes and objects in the house that stirred his imagination—doorways, an old hitching post, the view from a window, Alvaro working in his garden, Christina a few months before her death, seated in her kitchen chair gazing sideways at the world. Although *Christina's World* depicts an actual scene Andrew witnessed at the house, the guide told us, the details chosen are the artist's own. The woman in the picture is not meant as a copy of Christina. Rather, it is a composite of three women—the pose of Christina, the body of his wife Betsy, and the head of his favorite aunt—everywoman and no woman in particular.

After the talk, we were free to wander the three stories for the rest of the hour. We lingered by the woodstove, peered at the dust-caked workbench in the attached shed, ambled in the now-empty artist's studio. I took many photos, but wanted none of myself at the house. That would have seemed like a sacrilege. The rooms and the few sticks of furniture and household objects left there evoked in me some of the reverence for the lives lived there that I think Andrew Wyeth emoted with his brushstrokes. My most important revelation from being at that house, though, was its setting facing the bay that goes out to the open Atlantic. In *Christina's World*, her back is to the water as she inches home to reach her only harbor. But while her world may appear small, it was also, in Wyeth's eyes, rich.

He once said of the painting, "If in some small way I have been able in paint to make the viewer sense that her world may be limited physically but by no means spiritually, then I have achieved what I set out to do."

I am probably among millions over the decades who have seen that painting without realizing what exists just outside the frame. Talking about the painting to a friend's adult daughter recently, she remarked that she thought the painting was from somewhere in the Midwest, not Maine, and certainly not on the seacoast. For me, knowing the context of the house gives the painting a different meaning, one that will change how I experience future journeys from home to some significant location.

After returning home to New London, Connecticut, I started reading, *Andrew Wyeth: A Secret Life* (HarperCollins, 1996), a superb biography by Richard Meryman. In it I learned about the entire Wyeth family, the



complicated and not always admirable man Andrew Wyeth was, and his paradoxical place as an outsider to the exclusive club of the modern art world of urban America of his time. Though he painted rural Pennsylvania and Maine and obscure characters of both places in restrained earth tones without sentimentality, he achieved widespread popularity with everyday Americans and in fact the world. One of the largest collections of his works is at the Miyagi Museum of Art in Japan.

By reading the book, I came to understand why his paintings have such power. As much as possible, he adhered to an artistic aesthetic that demanded that he paint only people, objects, and landscapes he knew with intimacy. That he spent his entire career making art of basically two places—the part of Pennsylvania where he grew up and lived most of the year through his adult life, and midcoast Maine where he summered from boyhood to old age—underscores that truth. Layers of personal experiences and meanings undergird every image. Viewers will of course attach their own interpretations, but Wyeth set out with every painting to imply part of his own story that I believe gives his works energy beyond the force of the images themselves.

Every travel odyssey must end with going back where we began, to the people, landscapes, and objects of our everyday lives. Now, when I return from my next excursion to some natural wonder, I hope to have awakened my senses not just to the new sights and sounds and experiences, but also to have reawakened them to the familiar. Were I a painter myself, I could then look upon particular scenes and objects in my own home with a fresh outlook and perhaps capture the meanings they hold for me. Perhaps I would paint my long clothesline, with drying laundry lifted in the wind and swaying on the rope strung between the back of my house and a large old maple tree. Or the old side door, with its worn lock where I leave and reenter every day, or Tom with the beautiful boat he crafted with his own hands to keep us connected to the sea. The insights that arise from experiences in nature can give us new eyes for the way home to our own daily struggles for dignity and meaning, whether our world seems small or large or somewhere in between.

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